



Lessons from Gettysburg can Inform COVID-19 Response



In recent weeks, more than one public official has compared the U.S. Civil War and the COVID-19 pandemic, citing the number of casualties and the stress this crisis has imposed on communities across our nation. Though the pandemic is unprecedented, we can turn to our own history to inform our decision-making processes, shepherd our country through this crisis, and establish a foundation to respond to future crises we confront.

There are, indeed, lessons to be learned from the Battle of Gettysburg, a turning point in our Civil War. There was no single decision, no single event that led to the Union victory or the Confederate defeat. Instead, a series of leadership decisions—both good and bad—led to the outcome. As we face a deadly pandemic, current leadership at all levels should reflect on the anticipatory leadership and proactive positioning that were central to the Union victory at Gettysburg.

When U.S. Cavalry Officer John Buford rode into Gettysburg, he learned of the nearby invading army. He knew he could not withstand an enemy attack with his limited force, but knew, too, that he could perhaps “flatten the curve” with a well-chosen position until the entire Army of the Potomac could reach the battlefield. Buford’s early identification of the threat was critical, but so was advanced action and articulation of what he believed was necessary to mitigate the threat. After suffering defeat on the first day of the battle, the Union Army retreated to Cemetery Hill, gaining elevated terrain with strategic positioning that could be used as a force multiplier.

Buford’s anticipatory positioning can be applied to the pandemic and the decision-making process: recognize and articulate the threat, identify the high ground, and buy time to establish a true line of defense. Many historians credit Buford with winning the battle, if not the war, by what he did before the Army of the Potomac arrived at Gettysburg. Buford’s story provides a valuable lesson to those confronted with difficult decisions while they attempt to envision their strategic outcome.

In Washington State, Governor Jay Inslee took decisive action early in the crisis to contain the outbreak in Seattle by working with local authorities and Microsoft, the area’s most significant presence, to implement sheltering in place and social distancing as soon as the threat was identified. In Ohio, Governor Mike DeWine acted early and decisively in canceling a major weightlifting event in Columbus that would have brought tens of thousands of visitors from across the country to the Buckeye State.

These early actions—in spite of extensive criticism—caused short-term economic pain to their citizenry but positioned Washington and Ohio to deal with the crisis at an early stage when, as in any epidemic or pandemic, containment is the critical first step. Other locations not as quick to move to social distancing have faced a graver outbreak.

Gettysburg also offers invaluable lessons on position and resilience in the face of adversity. After two days of partial successes against Union forces, General Robert E. Lee launched a frontal assault against the entrenched Union lines occupying the high ground of Cemetery Ridge. Lee’s plan failed spectacularly and he was forced to respond to a new reality and withdraw his forces from the battlefield. After his defeat, Lee prepared his army for a methodical un-hastened retreat, and positioned the right people in the right places to respond to the continued adversarial threats.

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Our nation's battle against COVID-19 will not be won in a day, nor will it be won by a single decision or action. As we move through the pandemic, our national, state and local leaders will be challenged to generate a sense of unity of purpose in a country that is as divided politically as any time since the days of the Civil War. Even when a vaccine is developed, there will be tremendous leadership challenges at all levels to ensure distribution and availability to everyone in the United States.

It will be critical for all our leaders to conduct an honest examination of the nation's collective response to the COVID-19 crisis. Since this will not be the last pandemic we face, we owe it to our citizens to learn lessons from our failures and draw inspiration from our successes. If not, and we continue to use the same page out of the same playbook—where two ideologies are unwilling to compromise—we will continue to position our country against itself and risk creating an insurmountable toll of despair.

Submitted by the faculty of the Gettysburg Leadership Experience, FCC Services

John Regentin, Director; Chuck Burkell, Licensed Battlefield Guide, Retired Homeland Security; Jim Petrila, Retired CIA General Council